

COMMENT

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With US funding
and South African
strategies, we can
create a more
effective national
response to the
pandemic

World Aids Day on December 1 is an opportunity for us all to come together in a spirit of remembrance for those who have been lost to Aids and HIV/Aids-associated diseases including tuberculosis.

It is also a day to renew our compassion for those who are suffering due to HIV and Aids, and to revitalise our commitment to help others so they remain free from infection.

Despite the continuing tragedy of HIV/Aids, there is a growing basis for hope, and an important element of that hope is the success being achieved through a partnership between South Africa and the United States.

In 2003, US President George Bush helped spur the world into more concerted and collective action to combat HIV and Aids when he announced the President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief – a five-year, \$15-billion (now about R94,5-billion) programme focused on prevention, care and treatment worldwide.

This programme, which supports the Global Fund to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria and bilateral activities in 123 nations, is the largest international health initiative directed at a single disease that any nation has ever undertaken.

Also during 2003, President Thabo Mbeki met with Bush and they agreed the programme would be implemented in South Africa as a partnership between the two countries.

Since that time, our presidents' commitment has been fulfilled.

South Africa, as one of the nations most affected by this pandemic, has considerable capacity to respond with effective programmes and has a comprehensive national response plan that includes prevention, care and treatment as national priorities.

For these reasons, public-private partnerships here are now receiving more emergency plan support than is provided to any other country.

This year, the US investment in its partnership with South Africa was nearly \$150-million (about R946-million), with that figure expected to rise significantly in 2006.

All this funding is directed at supporting implementation of elements of the South African Comprehensive Plan and already many lives have been saved or extended through our joint efforts.

The emergency plan supports diverse prevention, care and treatment strategies, with an intense focus on HIV and Aids services reaching people in their families, communities and health facilities.

The heart of this strategy is a partner-



RIBBON OF HOPE: The US-funded Emergency Plan has helped support South African public and private organisations in their fight against HIV/Aids. Working closely with the Department of Social Development, the plan has been able to help communities and service providers reach over 100 000 orphans and vulnerable children with targeted care and support services.

ship with South Africa to build a locally driven response to the pandemic, implemented by South African service providers. HIV/Aids will be a fact of life for many years to come, and the fight against HIV and Aids will only succeed today, and be sustainable tomorrow, if the people of South Africa manage the response through

South African organisations with South African goals and objectives.

As Bush recently put it himself: "This effort is succeeding because America is providing resources and Africans are providing leadership. Local health officials set the strategy and we're supporting them."

In South Africa, this is being manifested

in every province and with over 250 local and international partners.

Through many of these partners, emergency plan funding, coupled with the even greater funding and efforts of the government's healthcare providers, is now helping to support life-saving antiretroviral therapy for over 40 000 South Africans.

In addition, nearly 300 000 South Africans already infected with HIV have received palliative care and support, again, in concert with the government and strong non-governmental organisations such as the South African Hospice and Palliative Care Association.

Working closely with the Department of Social Development, the emergency plan has been able to help communities and service providers reach over 100 000 orphans and vulnerable children with targeted care and support services.

In addition to treatment and care, the plan supports a wide range of locally designed prevention interventions that directly address Department of Health prevention priorities.

To help people protect themselves, the US-SA partnership supports the "ABC" strategies developed in Africa (abstain, be faithful, and correct and consistent use of condoms). Other key prevention efforts focus on helping to increase HIV counselling and testing; preventing mother-to-child transmission of HIV; ensuring safe blood and safe medical injections; helping intravenous drug users; and meeting the special challenges of protecting women and girls from HIV infection.

Accountability is central to the plan. The US is working with implementing partners to improve their ability to monitor and evaluate programmes. This allows our partners to learn from our experience and to ensure that only programmes that show results continue to be funded. The lessons we are learning will help make programmes here even more successful.

By working together, we also are helping to build capacity and sustainable responses to the HIV and Aids challenges so that our efforts result in an even stronger foundation for the future.

Obviously, much remains to be done and many more children, women and men need to be reached with prevention, care, and treatment services. But the hope we are beginning to feel is real and progress is being made.

Together, in partnership, the American and South African people can reach all those in need, and move closer to a future free of HIV/Aids.

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